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Woodley: Who is Robert Fisk, and why does he matter, especially now?
Robert Fisk

On Wednesday evening, Calgarians will have a rare opportunity to hear provocative bestselling author and veteran Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk.

He will be speaking at the University of Calgary in a lecture sponsored nationally by Canadians by Justice and Peace in the Middle East, and his talk — “Arab Awakening, but are we hearing the truth?” — will focus on the recent upheavals in the Middle East, and how they are being portrayed and perceived in western countries.

Why should Albertans head out on a winter night to hear Fisk?

In an era of “instant experts” on the Middle East, Fisk is the real thing. Based in Beirut for over three decades, he has been the Middle East correspondent for the British newspaper The Independent since 1988. During this time, he has reported on the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989), the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Iran-Iraq War, the Bosnian War, the first Gulf War, the Algerian civil war, the Kosovo war, and the general Arab-Israeli conflict, among others.

He has also covered key international incidents, including the Hama massacre of 1982 in Syria, the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. He has interviewed Ayatollah Khomeini and Osama bin Laden among other influential and important figures.
During his talks in Canada, he urges audiences to challenge lackadaisical reporting on the Middle East, specifically, the clichés like, “spike” in violence, “war on terror,” and other terms that are foisted flippantly on western readers.

He encourages Canadians to use the lens of history to confront hasty intervention by western governments in the Middle East. His own reports in recent weeks on the violence in Algeria and Mali do just that: “The real war in Mali,” he predicts, “will start when the French have made their ‘mission accomplished’ announcement.” Then, he contends, the decades-long sectarian tensions in that country will continue to boil over in violence, while world attention is turned elsewhere.

Fisk is the author of five books, including the seminal tome The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East (2005) — an eyewitness account of the region’s tragedy — that became an international bestseller. Fisk’s Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War (1990) provides the most authoritative account of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90), which he lived through and reported on.

The excellence and rigour of Fisk’s journalism has been recognized by journalists and non-journalists alike. He has received the British Press Awards’ International “Journalist of the Year” award seven times. Amnesty International U.K. has seen fit to grant him three times its prestigious Media Award, given in recognition of “excellence in journalism that has made a significant contribution to the U.K. public’s greater awareness and understanding of human rights issues.” He has also been the recipient of several other major journalism awards, both British and international, as well as eight honorary doctorates. He is considered the world’s top foreign correspondent.

A pacifist, he believes the role of the journalist is to investigate and challenge authority, especially when the authorities in question want to conduct a war.

As Fisk puts it, a journalist should be “neutral and impartial on behalf of those who suffer.” When Allied armies entered Nazi concentration camps at the end of the Second World War, he argues, journalists rightly documented the horrors experienced by the victims of these camps, and chose not to give equal weight to the perpetrators of these crimes. As such, Fisk’s own reporting emphasizes those who have lived through the pogroms, the bombardments and the horrifying prisons of the Middle East.

His current series of lectures focuses on the Arab Spring, or as he calls it, the Arab Awakening. In his talk, he dares his audiences to come to grips with the realities of the Arab Spring: what it is, and equally important, what it is not. Fisk delves beyond the platitudes about the importance of social media in these revolutions, and cites other equally important elements at play in these uprisings, and their evolving outcomes.

What we demand or permit our governments to do should hinge, Fisk asserts, on our understanding of the situation there. What happens there affects all of us, often in ways that we are not even aware of. If our government is considering sending Canadian troops to any part of the Middle East — or intervening there in other ways — Fisk enjoins us to inform ourselves about what’s going on “over there.”

Fisk rarely gives public lectures, especially on this side of the Atlantic. So, this opportunity to hear such a genuinely wise analyst — a compassionate, witty and funny one to boot — is not to be sneezed at.

Hearing or reading Fisk is essential for anyone who wants to come to an understanding of what is really happening in the Middle East. And it’s high time we all do.

Thomas Woodley is president of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, a not-for-profit organization with 38,000 adherents across Canada.

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A water main break has forced the emergency closure of two northbound lanes of Macleod Trail south this morning. City crews closed down the lanes between 13th Avenue and 15th Avenue to traffic and detours have been set up in the immediate area while repairs are underway.

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